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Soviet Copters Reflect Vietnam Lesson

Whether or not the U.S. military learned anything in Vietnam the Soviets certainly did.

Intelligence analyst sifting reports from the Afghanistan blitzkrieg have noted the Soviets' widespread use of their Mi24 helicopter gunships in both combat and police roles. These high-speed choppers can pepper a hillside with up to 6,000 rounds a minute and carry sophisticated equipment for spotting their targets on the barren hillsides of Afghanistan.

To the Pentagon's chagrin, the Red Army developed the Mi24 after observing the Americans' gunship techniques in the Vietnam conflict. Until then, sources told my associate Dale Van Atta, the Soviets' use of helicopters had been fairly primitive.

A top-secret Central Intelligence Agency report traces the Soviets' progress in helicopter tactics and development. "Until the early 1970s," it says, "the Soviet military used helicopters largely in support roles, such as airlifting supplies, equipment and men behind friendly battle lines to cope with shifting tactical situations.

"The concept of helicopter as pack horse has been reflected in the design of Soviet helicopters. They are large and rugged, but somewhat crude and aerodynamically inefficient. They lack the speed and maneuverability required for armed combat assault."

The report adds: "In the wake of the Vietnam war, however, the Soviets have changed their view on the proper role of the helicopter."

From a tentative start—using chop-

pers to airlift combat troops forward of the front line—the Soviets soon adopted wholeheartedly the concept of helicopters as attack aircraft. "In the Soviet view," a later analysis reported, "helicopters can range some distance behind enemy lines in ground-attack and antitank missions, as well as give supporting fire for air assault landings beyond the range of conventional Soviet ground weapons."

At first, the Soviets simply armed their existing copters with standard ground weapons. But then came their all-new superchopper.

"In late 1972," a secret CIA report notes, "the Soviets delivered to selected combat units a new helicopter, the Mi24, specifically designed for air assault operations. It was heavily armed and could carry about 10 troops; it had a retractable landing gear for increased speed, and short wings with weapon-carrying pylons."

The Mi24 has since been improved with bombs, rockets and antitank missiles. "It reportedly has a laser rangefinder that makes its weapons significantly more accurate than older systems," the intelligence report states.

"The limited Soviet experience with and the increased U.S. use of armed helicopters have focused Soviet attention on the vulnerability of armor and mechanized columns to armed helicopters," a secret report stated, adding: "Modern high-performance jet aircraft are relatively ineffective in intercepting low and slow-flying helicopters."

Finally, the Soviets have added a

still-unused capability to their Mi24s in preparation for combat against forces equipped with their own helicopters.

"The Soviets began in 1975 to train Mi24 crews in ground-controlled intercept techniques," the CIA reported, "and it seems that they have decided that this helicopter, which is faster and more maneuverable . . . will be used in an antihelicopter role." For this use, the superchoppers would be equipped with air-to-air missiles and infrared guided missiles to shoot down U.S. helicopters.

The Soviets are proving to be precocious pupils in the techniques of combat pioneered by the United States and demonstrated in Vietnam.